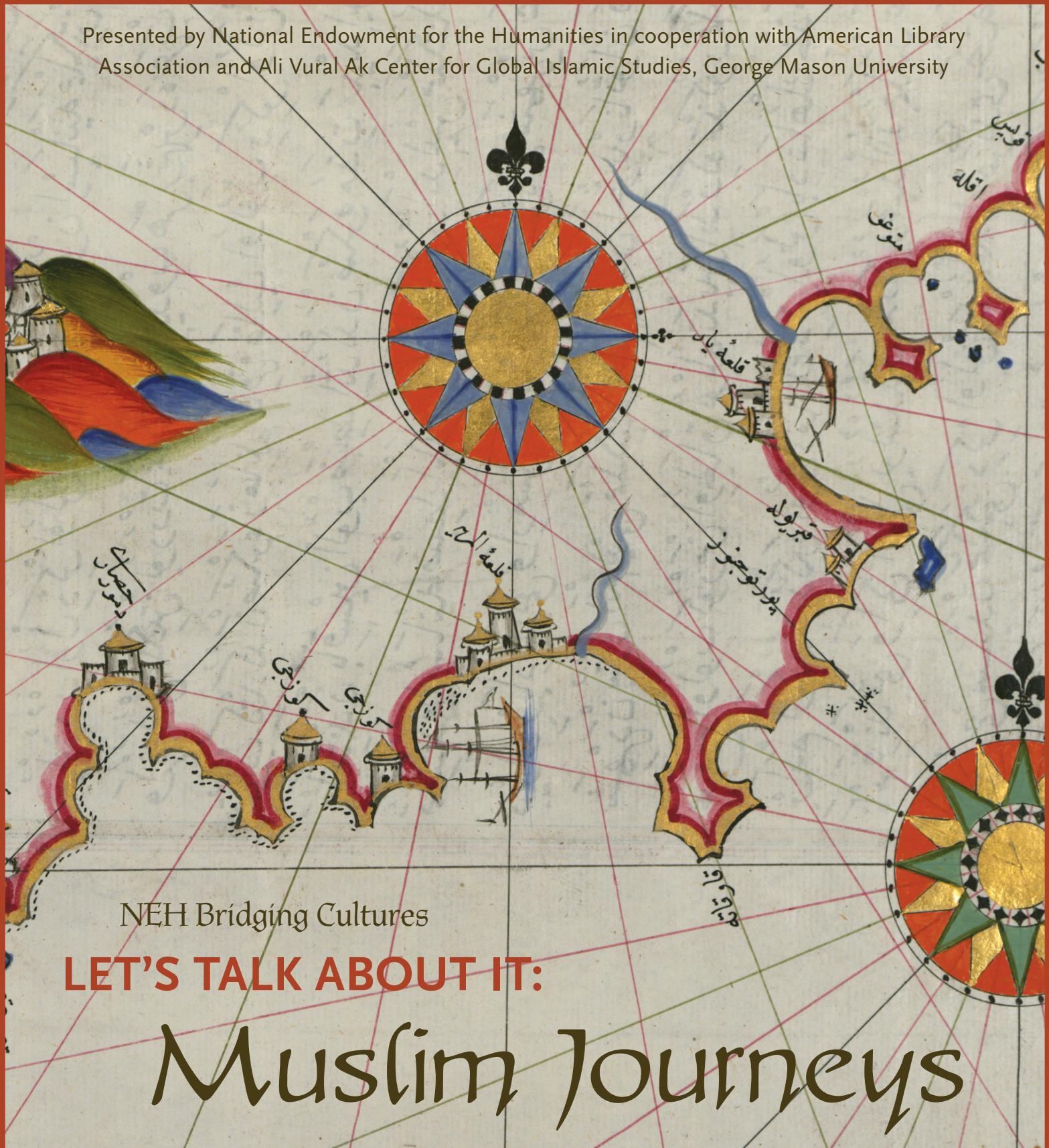


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NEH Bridging Cultures

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

Muslim Journeys



Literary Reflections

By Leila Golestaneh Austin · The Johns Hopkins University
With Ali Asani and Andrew Halladay · Harvard University

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Mantiq al-Tayr (The Language of the Birds), Islamic illustrated manuscript. Attributed to: Iran, Isfahan, Safavid period, circa 1600. Fletcher Fund, 1963 (63.210.11). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the democratic uprisings of the Arab Spring, a host of news anchors, political pundits, and scholars have sought to explain the role of religion in “the Muslim world.” Many Americans seeking to educate themselves about Islam have turned

to translations of the Qur’an, the foundational scripture of the Muslim faith. Yet without a deeper understanding of the wider historical and cultural contexts in which the Qur’an emerged and has been interpreted, the text itself is of limited use in explaining the diverse expressions



of Islam throughout the world. A complex web of political ideologies, socioeconomic conditions, societal attitudes toward gender, literary and artistic traditions, and historical and geographic circumstances, connect the Qur'an with its many interpretations across Muslim societies.

Life in Muslim societies, like life anywhere, consists of far more than just religion. We must look to the larger social, political, and cultural dimensions with which religion consistently intersects to better understand the principal aspirations and concerns of Muslims around the world. To this end, literature can offer us a valuable lens through which to view Muslim societies on their own terms.

The five works in “Literary Reflections” all emerge from communities that share a religious identification (Islam), yet in their pages we read about considerably more than religion—we encounter the hopes, dreams, and fears of characters as they relate to their communities and to the wider world. We encounter mundane routines, but also the crises and special events that punctuate them. In many of the works, individuals find themselves in vigorous negotiation between old and new, at times relying on traditional symbols and at other times inventing new ones. These texts reveal individuals caught in the midst of cultural change, in historical moments when religious rituals and symbols, experiences, and identities are being retained, borrowed, and reforged.

Through these stories, and through literature more generally, we realize that in their diversity, Muslim experiences encompass more than just religious texts and ritual practices. Instead, these experiences are embedded within a set of dynamic traditions that are constantly being reformulated. Nothing is monolithic in these works; the worlds in which the writers composed, and the worlds they imagined, are in many cases diametrically opposed. Little is stable; characters change (sometimes literally), the traditional and the modern both

conflict and intersect, and the distinction between the religious and the secular is blurred. At one level, these works are but glimpses into various expressions of Muslim societies, but collectively they teach us that literature provides representations of Islam that remove religion from isolation and situate it within wider contexts.

The Arabian Nights

Edited by Muhsin Mahdi (translated by Husain Haddawy)

The Arabian Nights, or, as it is known, *The Thousand and One Nights*, is among the works of Arabic literature best known in the West. The text was compiled during the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258), regarded as one of the glorious periods of Muslim civilization because of its significant contributions to scientific knowledge, cultural arts, engineering and architecture, and general intellectual innovation. A French translation introduced the *Nights* to Europe more than three centuries ago, and it has fascinated the West ever since. The obsession is understandable: the pages of *The Arabian Nights* abound with tales of demons and treasures, mysteries, erotic details, and riddles. Less celebrated, but equally interesting, are the more quotidian elements that reveal portraits of market life, or the roles of various trades and professions as they might have been understood at the time of the text's compilation. Elements from the stories continue to appear in numerous Western paintings and musical compositions, and the great variety of genres and sophisticated literary techniques in the text itself have influenced writers as diverse as Leo Tolstoy, Jorge Luis Borges, and Salman Rushdie.

As beloved as *The Arabian Nights* has become in the West, historically the text itself never had much importance in the Arab world. Few manuscripts existed until modern times, and the *Nights* was not a component of traditional

education. We can point to a few factors that might partially explain the apparent lack of interest in the *Nights* as a text. In an era when classical literature was a highly formal and disciplined art that required years of study to master, the tales were generally thought to be too coarse and unrefined to be included in the canon of classical Arabic literature. Moreover, as a mostly prose work, it did not enjoy the widespread popularity of poetry, which has long been considered the preferred form of literary expression in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. The folktales depicted in the *Nights* were instead passed down by word-of-mouth through generations. As in other parts of the world, folktales in Muslim societies, such as the ones depicted in the *Nights*, serve not only to entertain, but also to explain, through their elaborate and implausible fabrications, the mysteries of the natural world, to articulate fears and dreams, and to impose order on the apparently random, even chaotic nature of life. In this way, the fantastic elements in these highly popular stories offer the reader a fascinating window into the culture of the time while continuing to serve as a source of inspiration for literary works both in the Muslim world and the West.

Still deeper answers to the question of the role of *The Arabian Nights* in the Arab world lie in the history of the text itself. In the introduction to this edition of the *Nights*, Husain Haddawy explains how oral tales of Persia, Arabia, and India were incorporated and subsequently redacted. The non-Arab origins of many stories are indicated by the retention of Persian or non-Arab names, even as foreign locations themselves become substantially indigenized. The China of *The Arabian Nights*, for example, looks remarkably like Abbasid Baghdad. The preservation of foreign elements, together with the ways in which they were made accessible for local audiences, reveals that the aim of putting these tales in writing was not to create an authoritative version of them. Instead, the text of *The Arabian Nights* provided a written basis from which storytellers

could learn tales and freely adapt them. Just as writers of the *Nights* reworked oral traditions to meet their own needs and social milieus, storytellers modified tales from the *Nights* to suit the demands of their audience. The great flexibility with which stories were recorded, retold, and added to reveals that *The Arabian Nights* as a text was intended as a documentation of a vibrant oral tradition. The ease with which old stories were changed and new stories were added suggests a conceptualization of the literary canon very foreign to our twenty-first-century Western sensibilities.

As Western interest in textual forms of *The Arabian Nights* has risen and the storytelling tradition embodied by the tales has faltered, the *Nights* has likewise gained an increasingly prominent role in the Arab world. Yet the freedom with which these stories have been adapted through retellings and television serials, together with the many conflicting textual versions, demonstrates that the *Nights* continues to be regarded as a fluid text intended to entertain. This is critical for readers to remember in approaching this work.

Richard Burton's Victorian-era translation, which until recently was one of the most popular among English-language readers, rendered the Arab world sensationally exotic and frequently linked the outlandish events related in the *Nights* with events and practices in contemporary Arab society. This perspective has subsequently colored the way in which the West has imagined both *The Arabian Nights* and the Muslim world itself. Indeed, the *Nights* have been often criticized for providing fodder for Orientalism, an interpretive tradition that many scholars believe exaggerates the contrast between an "exotic" East and a more "rational" West. Nevertheless, they have also served as a source of inspiration for many contemporary writers, including Orhan Pamuk and Naguib Mahfouz, who have returned to this text with new eyes, subtly drawing on the storytelling style and literary motifs of these elaborate and fantastic tales in their own writing.



As Western readers, therefore—removed from the time in which the stories were collected, and from the culture in which they are even today being reinterpreted—we must recognize that these tales can be understood on multiple levels. Reading *The Arabian Nights* is useful not only because it tells us something about Arab society, but because it tells us what it isn't. Just as Hollywood blockbusters reveal something about the fascinations of American society without depicting typical American lives, so too does the *Nights* necessarily diverge from the lives of its authors and audience. We can allow ourselves to be fascinated by the same stories that have excited listeners and readers for centuries, but in so doing we must recognize that the meaning of these stories, like the society that created them, is constantly being reinterpreted as contexts change.

The Conference of the Birds

By Farid ud-Din Attar (translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis)

In the West, Sufism is often represented as a fringe movement within Islam, distinct from the two major interpretations of Islam, Sunni and Shia. In practice, however, Sufism refers to the mystical or esoteric dimensions of Islam and transcends such divisions. Contrary to Western perceptions, in many Muslim communities Sufism has enjoyed widespread popularity for centuries, playing a key role in shaping interpretations of Islam and its artistic and literary expressions. *The Conference of the Birds*, a twelfth-century masterpiece of Sufi epic poetry, offers us a window into the vast world of Persian Sufi literature, which includes some of the most renowned poets of world literature, most notably Rumi (d. 1273) and Hafez (d. 1390).

A perennial favorite among readers, *The Conference of the Birds* offers an accessible introduction to mystical Islam and its poetry. This

epic poem, like many others in the Persian Sufi tradition, teaches the reader that religious expressions extended—and continue to extend—beyond the space relegated to those claiming to represent formal religious authority. The works of Attar, a preeminent poet, remain authoritative sources of religious expression in Muslim communities of the Persian world. Islam in these communities is understood within, and accessible through, artistic and cultural spaces at least as much as explicitly religious ones. Works such as *The Conference of the Birds* remind us that the arts and religion consistently interpenetrate, and that more complex understandings of religious expression require us to look beyond the writings of religious scholars and theologians and into the realm of culture and literature.

Sufi literature, through its complex use of stories, poems, and humor, elucidates the goal of Sufi practice: to encounter God, the divine beloved. For Muslims, the paradigm for this spiritual meeting is the *mi'raj*, or the ascent of the Prophet Muhammad in a spiritual journey to the highest heaven, wherein he “sees” God. Sufis hold that this experience is only possible after the egocentric self becomes God-centric. This journey of spiritual transformation is demanding and engenders doubt, confusion, and protestation in the egocentric soul. This process is vividly captured in the allegorical *The Conference of the Birds*, in which the birds of the world undertake a quest to seek a new king—the legendary Simorgh, the king of all birds. The birds themselves are thinly veiled representations of various human faults; the Simorgh represents the Divine. Just as the human soul constructs obstacles on its journey of self-transformation, so too do the birds find excuses to abandon their arduous journey. Yet the birds who are committed to the journey must traverse the seven valleys of Yearning (*talab*), Love (*eshq*), Knowledge (*marifat*), Detachment (*istighnah*), the Unity of God (*tawhid*), Bewilderment (*hayrat*), and, finally an everlasting state of selflessness and annihilation in God.

As a didactic poem, *The Conference of the Birds* offers stories about and descriptions of birds that represent the susceptibility of the human soul. The knowledgeable hoopoe, who represents the spiritual mentor so critical to the Sufi path, guides the birds toward ultimate spiritual awareness. Along the way, each bird must overcome its attachment to worldly goods: the nightingale's love of the rose, the parrot's longing for immortality, the duck's contentment with water, the partridge's yearning for gems, and the owl's love of treasure. Only thirty birds persevere on the journey, successfully suppressing their base concerns until they can think only of God. The anticipated meeting with the Simorgh offers a central twist to the poem that, though still very satisfying in English translation, is heightened in the Persian original by clever wordplay that interprets the name of the Simorgh as *si morph*, "thirty birds." When they approach the throne of the Simorgh, the birds realize that he is to be found nowhere but within themselves. This spiritually dramatic ending reflects the Sufi notion that God is not external to or separate from the universe, but is, rather, the totality of existence, so long as we cultivate our Selves to "see" God everywhere.

Though Sufism continues to be an integral component of many Muslim traditions throughout the world, its emphasis on a spiritual experience with God has caused tension with more legalistic interpretations of Islam, many of which have denounced Sufism as heretical. This historical tension is illustrated in *The Conference of the Birds* by "The Arab in Persia", a story in which bandits of meager means, symbolizing Sufi mystics, strip an Arab of his wealth, which symbolizes the outward vanity and falsehood of a legalistic form of worship.

Remembering that Sufism is not relegated to a confined space within Islam is essential when we read *The Conference of the Birds*. Though it is unquestionably a Sufi work, its concepts and

themes have appealed to communities much wider than those strictly defined as Sufi or even Muslim. Amenable, like many other Sufi texts, to interpretation within multiple frameworks, Attar's epic poem transcends and blurs religious divisions.

Snow

By Orhan Pamuk (translated by Maureen Freely)

Snow is a multilayered postmodern novel about the political and social tensions of modern Turkey. The narrative is often elusive and contradictory; friendships and alliances are not always predictable, and are never stable. The novel's themes flow naturally from its setting, Kars, a northeastern border city with a large Kurdish population that historically straddled the Ottoman and Russian empires. Though Kars is far removed from the political and cultural centers of Turkey, the tensions that plague the wider country are still strong there.

The protagonist, Ka, a poet and journalist who has been living for many years in Germany as a political exile, travels to Kars to investigate the suicides of the so-called headscarf girls—women who have resisted the ban on wearing the headscarf in public. At the center of this phenomenon is the complex tension between traditionalism and secularism; the novel follows this theme closely even as the narrative quickly shifts away from the suicides. As in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*, tensions between the Western and the Islamic, the religious and the secular, seldom follow clean lines. Though he initially states that he considers Islam (and all religion) a manifestation of backwardness that Turkey should avoid, Ka forms a friendship of sorts with a Muslim radical whom he initially disliked and distrusted. He also comes to view the wearing of the headscarf as an act of resistance, and refers to the headscarf girls as Islamic feminists. Here



Pamuk alludes to an issue—women’s veiling—that has emerged as central in many others nations in the Muslim world that are experiencing a cultural revival of Islam.

The novel is postmodern in its fluid transition between objective third-person narration and an occasionally overinvolved (and not entirely reliable) narrator, as well as in its writing style, which—especially in the later chapters—adopts a nonlinear sense of time and a voice that approaches a dreamlike state. Yet unlike other postmodern novels, *Snow* has a dense and complex plot; characters and their confused loyalties are explored from many perspectives and are inextricably tied to the larger tensions of Turkish national identity the novel explores. With its sympathetic portrayal of its characters—whatever their affiliation—*Snow* sidesteps clear positions on Turkey’s identity or future. Indeed, it is difficult to map a Turkish political party or ideology onto the novel; it seems far more concerned with raising issues and contradictions than in offering solutions to the tensions it explores.

In *Snow*, we see that the spheres of culture, politics, and religion constantly intersect, revealing a society that is far more complicated than what can be contained within a single category of politics or religion. The lesson is an important one: In examining various political developments across the Muslim world, we must remember that the rhetoric of political parties cannot fully encapsulate the complex realities on the ground. In the 2012 Egyptian elections, for instance, many Egyptians felt disillusioned with all the major candidates because they believed that these office seekers offered one-dimensional solutions to multidimensional problems. In *Snow* and other works of Turkish literature, we see a portrait of Turkish society that disturbs the binary rhetoric of West versus East, of religious versus secular, of tradition versus modern, that has come to dominate Turkish politics.

Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood

By Fatima Mernissi

In the 1940s and early ‘50s, a variety of domestic political and social movements, though mostly unified in their opposition to French and Spanish occupation, offered contending visions of Morocco’s future. Fatima Mernissi’s coming-of-age memoir depicting traditional life in a harem in Fez during those years explores the social boundaries (*hudud*) that become fault lines in these debates, particularly the borders between childhood and adulthood, public and private, and male and female.

In particular, the strict codes that define and limit women’s lives bewilder the young Fatima, a ten-year-old girl who tries to understand why her best friend and cousin, Samir, has been banished from the women’s public bath. As one character explains, when a child approaches adulthood, “a cosmic frontier splits the planet in two halves. The frontier indicates the line of power because wherever there is a frontier, there are two kinds of creatures walking on Allah’s earth, the powerful on one side, and the powerless on the other.” Fatima soon understands that, as a woman, she is on the powerless side of the fault line.

Dreams of Trespass paints a candid picture of Morocco on the verge of independence and reform, explored through its characters’ conflicting attitudes about the roles of harem life and of tradition more generally. Here, the fault lines are complex, as not all women are interested in trespassing the boundaries of harem life. The lines set down by *hudud* cut across families as well. Fatima’s mother wishes to leave the world of traditional restrictions, though her father, bound by family obligations, cannot do away with the harem. Her parents’ relationship reveals another frontier, between a tolerant rural lifestyle and stricter urban standards: the more socially liberal

environment in which her mother grew up, “an open farm with no visible high walls,” sharply contrasts with the “fortress” harem she married into, which women cannot leave without male permission and supervision.

Tales from Fatima’s childhood suggest that tension between traditionalists and progressives does not follow religious lines, as those pushing for change consider themselves just as faithful to Islam as the most adamant conservatives. In several exchanges, women in both the traditional and progressive groups cite the Qur’an in service of their conflicting views on gender roles. As in *Snow*, there are no tidy relationships between tradition, progress, and religion. The complexity of these relationships is beautifully rendered in Mernissi’s memoir in the embroidery wars, where more progressive women such as Fatima’s mother test the limits of their imaginary freedom by embroidering birds in flight while other women, like the divorced Aunt Habiba, feel compelled to follow the more conventional style of stitching intricate but demure birds.

Dreams of Trespass also reminds us that in this moment of social transformation and cultural changes across the Muslim world, we cannot look for answers in religious expressions alone. A running theme in the memoir is Fatima’s similar realization about the West when she and her cousin try to grasp the meaning of major events in Europe. After trying to describe the alliances of major powers along religious lines, she concludes, “Religion could not explain the war going on in Christendom.”

In *Dreams of Trespass*, change is a long and multifaceted process requiring negotiation and compromise on the part of all involved. The harem residents tell and retell stories of strong female characters from *The Arabian Nights* not just for entertainment, but because they offer inspiring examples of brave women who steer their own destiny. Such stories of female strength, together with innovative tactics in dealing with restrictions,

are repeatedly acted out in the harem and remind us of the continued centrality of women in the process of social change.

A final and dominant theme in *Dreams of Trespass* is a nearly universal disdain among Fatima’s family for the European occupation. Yet they find that in Morocco, as elsewhere across the Muslim world, the transition from colonial status to self-rule is not a simple process. The legacy of colonial rule, combined with jockeying among domestic powers for influence and authority, is doing little to ease uncertainty about what life will be like once independence is won. As the younger generation learns French language and history and gains exposure to many ideas and movements current in Europe, Fatima’s uncle laments, “One day, we will probably manage to throw the French out, only to wake up and find out that we all look like them.”

The extent to which political groups wish to emulate, or reject, perceived Western models is at the heart of the many complex social and political debates across the Muslim world, debates that must be understood with attention to the transitional and postcolonial contexts that Mernissi, a sociologist, has explored in *Dreams of Trespass* and other writings. Her graceful and humorous memoir introduces us, through the perspective of a young woman, to this shifting political landscape, in which the sides are not always clear and the fault lines never simple.



Minaret

By Leïla Aboulela

Leila Aboulela belongs to a new group of female Muslim novelists living in Europe who, through their writing, are challenging the perception that Islam is oppressive toward women and incompatible with a Western lifestyle. In their novels, the central female characters find empowerment through their Islamic faith as they cope with forced exile and tragic losses and adjust to their new European homes. In *Minaret*, the protagonist, Najwa, has left a life of privilege in Sudan and moved to the United Kingdom. In her home country, she recalls, Islam and its rituals were reserved for the servant class rather than the Westernized class to which she belonged. “We weren’t brought up in a religious way. . . . We weren’t even friends in Khartoum with people who were religious. . . . Our house was a house where only the servants prayed.” Only after joining a newly-established mosque in London does she discover Islam afresh.

The mosque supports a transnational community of Muslim women that includes immigrants and converts. Like Najwa, many of these immigrants had in their home countries considered religion a sign of backwardness but have rediscovered Islam in Europe. As Najwa finds refuge and comfort at the mosque among Muslim women from around the world, Aboulela’s novel suggests a repositioning of religion’s role in modern life. The image of the minaret of the Regent’s Park mosque against the London skyline becomes a symbol of the new role of the Muslim community among secular immigrant groups in the heart of the modern city. As Najwa tells her friend Tamer, “We never get lost because we can see the minaret of the mosque and head home towards it.”

Najwa’s personal interactions allude to larger political critiques, particularly the tension between varying interpretations of Islam and

indigenous Marxist movements. This is apparent in her treatment of the relationship between Najwa and a love interest, Anwar, a Marxist student involved in overthrowing the Sudanese regime, in which her father was involved. Disagreements between Najwa and Anwar over religion and politics reflect the general disappointment with promises of freedom and progress prevalent throughout this region of the Muslim world. Other relationships in the novel similarly evoke the complex connections and tensions between secular, leftist ideologies, and religious movements in Sudan. These competing visions of an independent Sudan further complicate the two characters’ personal search for an authentic Muslim identity while living in Europe.

Another main theme of the novel is the role of women in the cultural revival of Islam, explored from the viewpoint of a Muslim woman who actively pursues religious learning at her mosque. The emergence of women-specific lessons, in which participants can openly discuss Islamic history and the Qur’an, enables these women to shape their own role in Islamist movements as intentional actors rather than passive subjects. Indeed, Najwa challenges multiple stereotypes about Muslim women. Far from being controlled by men, she lives alone in a foreign country, independently chooses to attend the mosque and— even in the face of European prejudice—decides to wear the veil. She believes the veil gives her a new dignity and beauty which is “attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer.” For modern Muslim women such as Najwa, the veil is not a symbol of gender discrimination but of empowerment and identity. In representing a Muslim woman at so many intersections, *Minaret* proposes a reconciliation between modernity and tradition, in which Islamic doctrines and practices shape modes of living in the modern, Western world.



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Andrew Halladay is in the early stages of his graduate work in Islamic studies at Harvard University. He concentrates primarily on the social aspects of the modern period, especially as they have been represented in literature and film. Regionally, he concentrates on South Asia, Central Asia, and China. He is currently the assistant to Professor Ali Asani, the chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard, and he has been involved with projects for Harvard's Prince Alwaleed Islamic Studies Program.



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Let’s Talk About It: Muslim Journeys

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Cover: Fifteenth-century map by Piri Reis of the coastline of Andalusia and the city of Granada.
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